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A DOWN TO EARTH SUPPLEMENT FOR THE YOUNG AND CURIOUS

WINGS OF WONDER

Special Edition

Honoring our feathered companions, this edition brings together the best stories from the 'Near and Dear' archives!

Near and Dear

THE HOUSE OF SPARROWS

Where happiness comes in small packages—the ever-delightful house sparrow.

Gargi Mishra

We often ignore our immediate periphery in our quest for finding excitement. Just think of the house sparrows! As a kid, out of sheer ignorance, I recall embarrassingly how I plundered their nests. But now, I compensate by feeding their chicks, watering them, and sheltering them in their cushy abodes.

In all this while, these humble birds never ever deserted their homes nor me. We often take them for granted because we grow up with them in our surroundings—they are a part of our natural world. But, of late, I feel, that we too are a part of their natural world. They are well acquainted with our presence—our smell and sight. This is particularly so where people live under traditional thatched roofs. As most of us became citydwellers, I am very happy that these birdies have not chosen to abandon us.

Diligent little sparrows still build nests near my house and frequently visit my balcony. They are here in large numbers because they enjoy the fig trees, food, water bath, and dust bath that is available here. Please also note that all this is in the midst of a megalopolis like Delhi. Their chirpiness caught the attention of one of our family friends, who after seeing their large crowd, chuckled, "Who says all sparrows have become extinct? Rather, all of them have taken shelter at your place!"

It is believed that house sparrows have been living with humans since the Stone Age. They originated from the Middle East and as humans expanded agriculture and sailed across the seas, sparrows too flew alongside. Thus, the 'spearwa' of old Greek times became the 'sparrow' as we know today.

Sparrows adapted themselves to a broad climate range, including dry and saline areas. They evolved to survive on less water and developed an omnivorous diet, mainly comprising berries. They can even swim short distances underwater to evade predators in spite of not being waterbirds. This is how they adapted to their immediate environment. Such few secrets enabled these tiny fliers to disperse throughout the planet.

Today, sparrows are widely distributed across India and the world. They are strictly nonmigratory. They avoid deserts, grasslands, and woodlands. Rather, they are adapted to live with humans, both in rural and urban areas, though they have a new set of predators here. Cats, dogs, birds of prey, squirrels, snakes plus humans are the main reasons behind their declining numbers. Heavy use of agrochemicals also drastically dipped their population. Even more horrifying is the ‘ Sparrow pie,’ a pudding made of sparrow meat, for which they were hunted rampantly until the most of 1950s.

So, let’s get together and build a safe house for sparrows.

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CALL ME HU-PU!

Aimed to amaze unfazed—the Common Hoopoe

Its crown extends with a fineness and style as some royal aristocratic headgear. But the cinnamon-coloured plumage induces earthiness to its attitude. As it humbly blends into the woods, its black-white stripes flash a regal reminder. And as it walks thoughtfully on the ground, 'hoopoe' is what we admire.

The 'hu-pu' or 'hu-po,' as it is pronounced, is named exactly after the calls of this bird. It belongs to the family 'Upupidae' and species *Upupa epops*. Popular as Common Hoopoe or Eurasian Hoopoe, this resident bird of India, seasonally migrates across the subcontinent. During monsoon, for example, it flies from Western Ghats to regions downhill.

Hoopoe's crown adds glamour to its distinctive features. Its fawn brown body conceals it against the surrounding soil, where it strides briskly with its short and slender legs. The prominent black and white bands on its wings and tail look like "a little zebra in our park!" That's how my seven-year-old daughter summarized it years ago, little knowing that this birdy will pose as her first on-camera supermodel.

With their long and slender beak, hoopoes probe and pick their food. Foraging alone, as if commanded to 'earn your own food,' they deftly march through open fields and feed on insects, small reptiles, and frogs. Plant matter, like seeds and berries, also comprise their diet.

Instead of weaving a typical twig nest, this stately avian builds mansions on bare and lightly vegetated areas. They love to live near trees, cliffs, walls, or abandoned burrows, where both the husband and wife aggressively guard their abodes. The gentleman doesn't hesitate to discard all his chivalry if the house is under danger and through his fiery bill can stab or blind any intruder.

The incubating and brooding lady also deploys a defense mechanism to save her nest and nestlings. Her uropygial glands produce a very foul liquid, which smells like rotting meat. This gland, present in a majority of birds, is commonly called the preen or oil gland. The mother hoopoe rubs this stinking fluid, which otherwise is an antibacterial agent, onto her brood to ward off any attackers or parasites. The hoopoe chicks too spray their droppings, make snake-like hissing sounds, and use their bill and wings to fight invaders.

Hoopoes are most interesting when observed sun bathing and sand bathing. Particularly, when under sun, they take a peculiar position—head tilted backwards, and wings and tail spread above the ground. And if you think they're dead, these hopeful hoopoes can surprise you any moment!

Near and Dear

FROM THE WORLD OF THE ORIENT

Multitalented creatures with fascinating features—the Oriental Magpie-Robins

This bird is a master of vocabulary. It can mimic other birds and animals flawlessly. It is also as expressive and emotive as the late actor Irrfan Khan. It is vocal on emotions but expresses only when the need is unavoidable.

It is none other than one of our closest avian acquaintances, the Oriental Magpie-Robin. Also, known as Asian Magpie or just Magpie Robin, it was earlier a member of the 'thrush' family of birds but now belongs to Old World Flycatcher's.

A resident of the Indian subcontinent, it doesn't visit any arid areas. In winters, it moves to lower elevations. Maybe this Magpie has a special affiliation for humans; hence, it avoids forests or grasslands and lives near human settlements, even in our balconies. It builds its nest in tree hollows, wall gaps, or even in the roofs of buildings.

A neat looking fellow, it has a glossy, blue-black head, breast, and upperparts. The lady's head is bluish-grey instead. Both have white wing bars that start from their shoulder, and run to the wing tip and glossy white underside. Slightly hooked black beak and black beady eyes add on to their glamour.

A gentleman by nature, the robin often bows to all and shivers its long tail out of respect. But holds it upright while picking up the tidbits and creepy-crawlies from the ground. Primarily omnivorous, it eats anything edible from grains to earthworms, flower nectar, berries, vegetables, and occasionally, geckos, centipedes, and fish.

One can argue the Magpie Robin is a fine Indian classicist. The high octave notes of this seasoned singer—which he uses for territorial, distress, threat, begging, emergency, and roosting calls—pour honey to the ears. The tenor in his voice often impresses his lady love. But when it comes to defending his territory, one can witness his vicious hissing and harsh *churr* or *chhekh* notes.

There is also infamy attributed to Magpies. They are known as thieves of shiny objects. But an inconclusive research by Exeter University on Eurasian Magpies shows that they suffer from 'neophobia—fear of new things'. However, Dr Tony Shephard, lead researcher of the Centre for Research in Animal Behaviour told BBC News: "Some birds do use eye-catching objects in the nest after mating, like Black Kites, to ward off potential predators. But we had already looked inside a dozen magpie nests and not seen any shiny objects. So, I was not expecting magpies to use objects for this purpose."

But my daughter wonders, "Why then do they take the objects near their nests and scatter them around? Why not somewhere else?" Would you like to answer?

EYE ON YOU—THE INDIAN WHITE-EYE

Indian White-Eye—when beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder

Whenever that sweet tinkling sound traverses through my balcony, my entire mood rejuvenates. I crane my neck, investigating its source, and scan my lushy green enclave for a soft jingling song. Tracing the *tsee…tseer…* notes, I rejoice with delight on spotting the chirpy, cute, bundle of joy—the Indian White-Eye. Do you think the White-Eye is called so because it wears white spectacles? If yes, then you are absolutely correct! A ring of white feather around its eyes has earned this birdie its English title. In fact, it was originally named the 'Oriental White-eye' but later coined the 'Indian White-eye,' for geographical specificity. So quintessential is this chalky-white circle that even the species' scientific name refers to this identification mark. *Zosterops palpebrosus*: where 'Zosterops' means 'girdle eyes' in Greek and 'palpebrosus' means 'prominent eyelids' in Latin.

This sober acrobat displays a yellowish olive-green upper body and greyish-white undersides. This contrasts with its bright

yellow throat and vent, and its black curved bill. With short wings and squarish tail, it slenderly migrates in local areas—forests, orchards, and groves.

Diligently sucking the flower nectar and gulping down the pulpy berries, the White-Eyes are crucial pollinators. No wonder they celebrate a flower feast in my garden, not just in ones or twos but in whole large groups! Primarily insectivorous, these White-Eyes are very sociable and enjoy living collectively. Their husband-wife pair are also alike.

One day, my daughter spotted a White-Eye couple in our neighbourhood. The duo was busy gathering some nesting materials. By the time we traced their construction site, the pair had already weaved a beautiful cup-nest using cobwebs, cotton, soft feathers, and plant fibers. Innocent, my baby daughter demanded, "I wanna stay there. Can I fit myself into it?"

After a few days, we noticed three beautiful pale-blue eggs resting inside this new abode. We observed a parent ferrying food for the chicks, so we remained aloof to avoid any disturbance. In fact, a greater threat to them is habitat degradation, declining fruit trees, and rise in predators and robust species, i.e., those who are more adapted to their environment.

Sometime later, the nest remained intact but its residents had abandoned it; probably, the fledglings had taken their flight. Howsoever tiny the White-Eye, it did give a thought to my doll and I. Till now, my princess is comforted in a world her parents built for her, but in a few years, she too will have to take her flight and explore the wide world outside.

Near and Dear

HOLD NO BARS

The Brown-Headed Barbet, raising a call barring none.

If there is ever a bird that can rival even a hulk in roaring aloud, then that birdy has to be the Brown-Headed Barbet. This little creature's blaring decibels can screech through the morning silence and can knock anyone out of their afternoon siesta as well. Its challenging, almost enticing, avian call proceeds like: *tur-r-r-r kutrook-kutrook-kutrook.*

But barely a glance at this handsome can assure you that its personality is even more influential. The 'barbet' has earned its family name from the barb-like whiskers around the base of its beak. This peachy-pink bill is heavy in structure. It contrasts with the Barbet's grass-green body. The short and slender tail looks disproportionately small in comparison to the body of the barbet. In his/her under-tail area are noticeable its dull bluish coverts (the small and soft feathers that cover the base of tail feathers). Surprisingly, the barbet can change the colour around its eye from a bright lemon-yellow to dark orange within seconds.

Further, there are white streaks spread over its brown head, neck, breast, and upper back. These white streaks discontinue towards its shoulders, belly, and flanks (sides of lower belly). But the presence of white speckles on the shoulders of the Brown-Headed Barbets differentiates them from their close relatives, Lineated Barbets.

Nonetheless, the Brown-Headed Barbets make a gorgeous couple.

Both husband and wife are identical and are found widely across the Indian subcontinent. They often migrate seasonally to lower elevated areas, and even nest in urban spaces and gardens. In fact, they are highly territorial in nature and guard their nests aggressively. Frugivorous in diet, they feed upon wild ficus figs, such as banyan and peepal, along with a few other drupes, berries, flower petals, and nectar. At times, they also consume insects to fulfill their protein requirements.

Though the brown and green cover of the barbets perfectly blends them with the woods, it still cannot protect them from the lustful eyes of preying hunters. Apart from the glaring habitat degradation, capturing them for pet trade is threatening their population. But before the barbets feel endangered further, lets welcome their roaring call with this onset of summer.

A CHATTING ROCKSTAR

A chirpy pitter-patter about the Brown Rock Chat

Knock-knock, who's there? The holy Brown Rock Chat. A holy who???... That's how a timid bird perplexed me at 3:30am in the dark of dawn. It was February 2019 and I was calming the anxieties of my daughter, who was fearing her imminent exams. Persistently knocking my door—I hesitated to investigate any such visitor at an ungodly hour. So, I peeped out from an adjacent window to survey my doorway and was delightfully surprised to find a beautiful, winged creature.

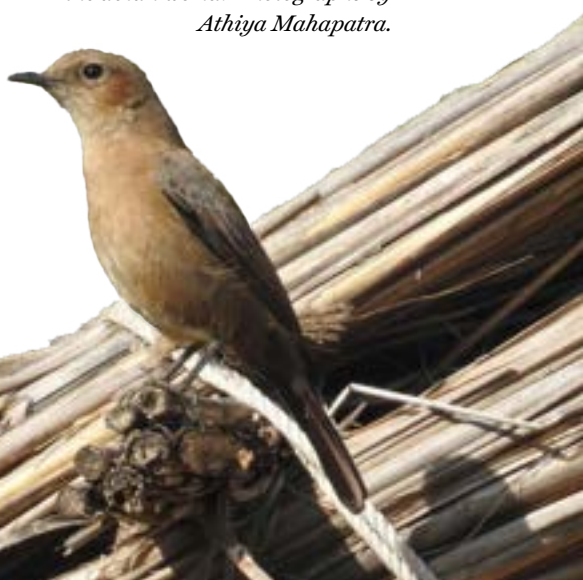
"Mama, look who's come to wish me luck!" My doll whispered in ecstasy. A sweet, tiny female Indian Robin, I assumed, considering its modest cover and typical mannerisms. The bowing of its head and flickering of its tail were recognizable; though its distinct posture and traits seemed a little awkward. Plus, its size, chestnut vent, and rounded tail also appeared unusual.

Gradually, this almost-Robin gathered our attention every night as it diligently fed upon the insects piled under our porch's tube light. This was a mound of dead flies, forced out of their hideouts by untimely rains and buzzing throughout the night around our artificial lamps. Finally, it was this early-riser's vivid avian call—melodious songs with multiple notes like those of a thrush—which left us spellbound. It could even flawlessly imitate the calls of about eight of its fellows, including the Yellow-eyed Babbler, Black-winged Cuckoo Shrike, and Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. Hence, we were compelled to rediscover this special guest—the quintessential Brown Rock Chat or, simply, the Indian Chat.

Belonging to the chat sub-family, this resident bird is endemic to the northwest and central India. Found in ravines, ruins, and rock clefts, it loves nesting in bungalow compounds and holes in walls. Its chocolate fudgy appearance is owing to its brown upper body, rusty underbelly, dark wings, and blackish tail. Its dark wood plumage conceals it at night, protecting it from the preying eyes of predators. Both the husband and wife wear these unassuming identical attires yet they appear outstanding in their natural setting.

Rock Chats are diurnal but often feed until midnight. We observed our visitant active from about 3am in twilight till 9pm late evening! This evolution of nocturnal foraging over long undisturbed hours has increased its success rate of capturing insects at night manifold compared to the daytime. In addition to behavioural adaptations, its slender bill, slightly curved at the tip, also helps it feed efficiently. During monsoons, when they nurture their chicks, their nutritional requirements are quite high. No wonder our companion gorged upon mounds of food as if there were no tomorrow!

The author is an amateur ornithologist and closely follows the avian world. Photographs by Athiya Mahapatra.



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